

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Parkers Crossroads

By **Michael R. Bradley**

Parkers Crossroads is an engagement fought between the command of Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest and two brigades of infantry commanded by Colonel Cyrus Livingston Dunham and Colonel John Wallace Fuller at Parkers Crossroads in West Tennessee on December 31, 1862. The battle was the culminating engagement in a three-week long raid made by Forrest against the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, the line which carried supplies from Columbus, Kentucky, to the army led by Major General Ulysses Grant which was advancing through central Mississippi to attack Vicksburg. Forrest's raid was part of a coordinated move by Confederate cavalry in the west to stop Union advances. Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan was tasked to raid the Louisville and Nashville Railroad which supplied the Army of the Cumberland under Major General William Starke Rosecrans, Major General Earl Van Dorn was assigned to attack Grant's supply base at Holly Springs, Mississippi, while Forrest was to attack the railroad which funneled supplies to Holly Springs.

Forrest had left Spring Hill, Tennessee, on December 10, leading a brigade composed of the 4th Tennessee Cavalry under Colonel James Wellborn Starnes, the 8th Tennessee Cavalry under Colonel George Gibbs Dibrell, the 9th Tennessee Cavalry under Colonel Jacob Barnett Biffle, and the 4th Alabama under Colonel Alfred Alexander Russell. Captain Samuel L. Freeman commanded a battery of six smoothbore six pounder cannons. The regiments Forrest commanded were made up of new recruits for the most part, although each regiment contained a cadre of veterans. Their armament was inadequate, with many of the men carrying flint-lock muskets dating from the War of 1812 while others carried shotguns they had brought with them from home. These approximately 1,800 men were entering an area occupied by 17,000 U.S. troops.

Forrest had reached the Tennessee River at Clifton, Tennessee, on December 13 where he was met by the newly organized battalion led by Colonel Nicholas Nichols Cox. This group had built two small flatboats and two days were consumed in crossing the river. Moving north, Forrest reached Lexington, Tennessee, and attacked the town and its Union garrison on December 18. This was the first in a string of small victories which spread consternation through the Union command in West Tennessee and started rumors which vastly exaggerated the size of the force Forrest led.

Brigadier General Jeremiah Cutler Sullivan, overall commander of Union forces in the area, ordered his scattered units to concentrate at Jackson, Tennessee. This move secured the supplies gathered there but left the countryside open and the rail lines exposed. Forrest responded by breaking his command into several small units with each unit assigned a different bridge or

trestle to destroy. In a matter of hours miles of the rail lines had been put out of commission, suffering damage which would not be repaired for several months.

For the next week and a half Forrest's command ranged over West Tennessee before concentrating near Dresden, Tennessee, on December 25 to begin their withdrawal to their point of entry at Clifton.

By December 29 Union infantry, commanded by Colonels Dunham and Fuller were pursuing Forrest. Forrest was moving east from the vicinity of Trenton, Tennessee, towards Huntingdon, Tennessee. At Huntingdon a road led south to Lexington and on to Clifton. As Forrest moved east toward Huntingdon he was told by some of his scouts that Union infantry had reached that town ahead of him. Forrest then turned south-east along a secondary road which would lead him to the Lexington route south of Huntingdon at Parkers Crossroads. Repairing an abandoned bridge over a branch of the Obion River, Forrest paused at Flake's Store, a few miles northwest of Parkers Crossroads and the Lexington road.

Flake's Store was chosen for a bivouac because there was a large spring which furnished water for the command and because Forrest knew the Flake family would not reveal his position, as one of their sons was in the Confederate army. Often overlooked by historians is the fact that there was strong Union sentiment in West Tennessee. Trade from that area flowed north, along the Tennessee River to Paducah, Kentucky, and via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to St. Louis. Political sentiment followed the money, so Forrest was aware that some residents of the area would take any opportunity to tell his pursuers his location.

Knowing that two brigades of infantry were not far from his position, Forrest considered his options. He could remain in place at Flake's Store, allowing the infantry to draw closer, and then fight them one after the other before they could concentrate against him. This would allow Forrest to rest both the men and horses of his command for a full day. If he found he could not defeat the pursuing infantry in detail, then Forrest was confident his mounted command could outdistance the infantry. In his typical aggressive fashion, Forrest chose to stand and fight.

The leading Union infantry brigade was commanded by Colonel Dunham and was composed of the 39th Iowa, 50th Indiana, 18th Illinois, 122nd Illinois, and three guns of the 7th Wisconsin Artillery. Dunham reached Clarksburg, about five miles north of Parkers Crossroads, on the night of December 30th and fought a brief skirmish with Confederate scouts. Having determined that Forrest was not yet at Parkers Crossroads he stopped for the night and sent word to the second brigade, commanded by Colonel Fuller, to follow the next morning. Fuller commanded the 27th Ohio, 39th Ohio, and 63rd Ohio. During the night Forrest sent four companies of the 4th Tennessee under the command of Captain William Sugars McLemore to take up position between Dunham and Fuller on the road from Huntingdon to Parkers Crossroads. Forrest intended for McLemore to delay Fuller and to keep Forrest informed about the progress Fuller was making

towards the battlefield. The written orders McLemore received, however, were vague and subject to misinterpretation.

On the morning of December 31 Dunham marched for the Crossroads early in the day, reached it by about 7:00 A.M., and sent the 50th Indiana and part of the 18th Illinois, supported by three guns of the 7th Wisconsin Artillery, towards Flack's Store.

Forrest sent his artillery, one battery commanded by Samuel Freeman and a newly formed unit armed with captured guns commanded by Captain John Watson Morton. These eight guns, supported by about 300 cavalry, drove the Union force back to the Crossroads. By 9:00 A.M. the battle lines were being drawn at what would become the scene of the main part of the battle. At this point Dunham's line faced west and ran north and south along the Huntingdon—Lexington road.

Forrest concentrated his men against Dunham's right flank and over the next three hours of fighting slowly forced the Union line of pivot to its rear. By noon Dunham's line ran east to west, facing north. The left, or western flank, was anchored on the Huntingdon—Lexington Road while the right, or eastern flank, rested in a small wood lot. For most of its length the U.S. infantry had the scanty shelter of a split rail fence. Forrest's men were in the open but were mostly out of effective rifle range; again the Confederate artillery was doing most of the fighting, having been advanced to within 400 yards of the Union line.

Dunham had lost one of his pieces of artillery in the initial engagement near Flake's Store when a Confederate round dismounted the piece. His artillerymen were not experienced in laying their guns so their fire was ineffective, and the Southern marksmen had targeted the horses which pulled the guns, so by noon Dunham could no longer maneuver his artillery nor could he bring up replacement ammunition from the caissons belonging to the battery. The only means of countering the Confederate's artillery was to attack and twice Dunham ordered his men across their rail fence and across the open fields to try to capture some of the enemy guns. Both attempts failed.

Freeman's Battery, which had accompanied Forrest from the beginning of the raid, was armed with six pounder smoothbore guns. Morton's Battery had been formed during the course of the expedition and was armed with two three-inch rifled guns captured at Lexington, Tennessee, and two mountain howitzers which had been in the possession of Colonel Thomas Alonzo Napier's battalion when that unit joined Forrest after the raid had begun. One of these howitzers had burst during the morning's fight.

As the winter day wore on Forrest employed one of his favorite tactics, a double envelopment. By about 2:00 P.M. Dunham was being attacked on three sides at once, his men were drifting away from the rail fence they had held for several hours, and small groups of his men had become isolated and had surrendered. Dunham himself, and the largest fragment of his

command, had taken a stand in a copse of woods several hundred yards south of Parkers Crossroads and a flag-of-truce had been sent to Dunham seeking his surrender, an offer he refused.

As Dunham's situation grew worse during the morning and early afternoon, the brigade commanded by Fuller was steadily approaching the Crossroads from the north. About a half-mile from the rear the Confederate position Fuller deployed his men from column into line and swept forward. Near the Parker residence the Union infantry encountered the horse-holders of Dibrell's brigade and fired a volley into them, killing a few men and many horses. This attack on the horse-holders was a serious event for Dibrell because without their mounts his men had lost their mobility.

A Staff Officer informed Forrest, who was confronting Dunham, that a force had suddenly appeared in his rear. Forrest is said to have replied, "Do? Charge them both ways!" While this reply is probably not exact (Forrest was notorious for his extensive vocabulary of profanity) it is a description of what Forrest did. Starnes, Biffle, and Russell attacked Dunham, fixing this body of enemy in place while Forrest took his 125-man Escort company and any other men he could gather together and made a galloping attack on Fuller's men as they were trying to round up the remnants of Dibrell's horse-holders. One of those Forrest "gathered" was Sergeant Nat Baxter of Morton's Battery. Baxter was leading his gun crew and gun to the rear when Forrest stopped them and ordered them to fall in line with the Escort Company. Baxter replied that the gunners had no side arms and could do no fighting. Forrest said that was of no matter, he wanted to make as big a show as possible. The gunners made the charge empty handed.

The attack by this small body of Confederates had the desired effect on Fuller's men. They stopped to reload their weapons and reform their ranks and this pause allowed many of Dibrell's men to regain their horses while the rest of Forrest's men quickly moved down the Lexington Road.

There was no effective pursuit of Forrest. The Confederate force reached Clifton on January 1, 1863, and recrossed the Tennessee River on January 2.

Forrest lost 60 men killed and wounded and had another 300 captured at Parkers Crossroads. Two pieces of artillery were lost, including the one which had burst, and three wagons of supplies gathered during the expedition had to be abandoned. However, the command escaped intact. Union losses were 273 killed and wounded and 83 captured.

It is notable that Forrest took responsibility for allowing Fuller's Brigade to surprise him with its attack in his rear. When it was pointed out to him that his orders to Captain McLemore were vague and unclear Forrest corrected his mistake by adding to his staff Major Charles W. Anderson, former Vice-president of the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad, a man who knew how to write clear and precise directions. William S. McLemore would become one of Forrest's most trusted and long-serving subordinate officers.